Letter from Taizé

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THE BUDAPEST MEETING

Hospitality, A Face of God

Opening one's door to strangers is never easy. As a result of months of work, many people could be welcomed not just in Budapest but in many places in the surrounding area.

The morning of December 28th, thousands of Hungarian families were impatiently waiting to meet the young people they would be hosting for the next five days. Will they manage to arrive? Will they be delayed by the snowstorm blanketing part of central Europe? Will customs formalities at the border take an incredibly long time? How will we deal with the language problem? In addition to these fears, the international situation was not very reassuring.

As a result of months of work, hundreds and hundreds of preparation meetings, not just in Budapest but in many places in the surrounding area, 180 parishes of different denominations were able to prepare a welcome. Some were an hour away from the capital, close to the Slovakian border. Many schools were also made available. And thanks to appeals on Hungarian radio and television, thousands of places were also found in families that usually do not go to church.

Three thousand young adults from throughout Europe arrived on December 26th to organize the welcome on the 28th. A news program on French television emphasized the astonishing sense of service still alive in the young. Thanks in large part to those who came early, it was possible to welcome the 70,000 participants in the meeting and to pray with them.

While most of the other nations received their first welcome in schools throughout the city, the Poles arrived at the Exhibition Centre itself before being sent to their host parishes. They were the most numerous nationality present. Many people wonder why so many thousands of young Poles participate in the meeting year after year. It does not seem to be a simple flash in the pan: throughout the autumn months, two hundred preparation points in Poland not only distributed information about the meeting and the journey, but also offered times of prayer and of reflection together. "In Wroclaw in December, before I left for Budapest, each day there was a prayer using Taizé songs in one of the churches in the city," said Alicia, a political science student.

But 4,000 Romanians also came, and just as many Italians. The Ukrainians, the German-speakers, the Croatians and the French were almost as numerous. Never before were so many people from the Balkans present, which increased the welcome presence of Orthodox Christians. To reach Budapest, some of the 300 Portuguese had to leave home on Christmas Day.

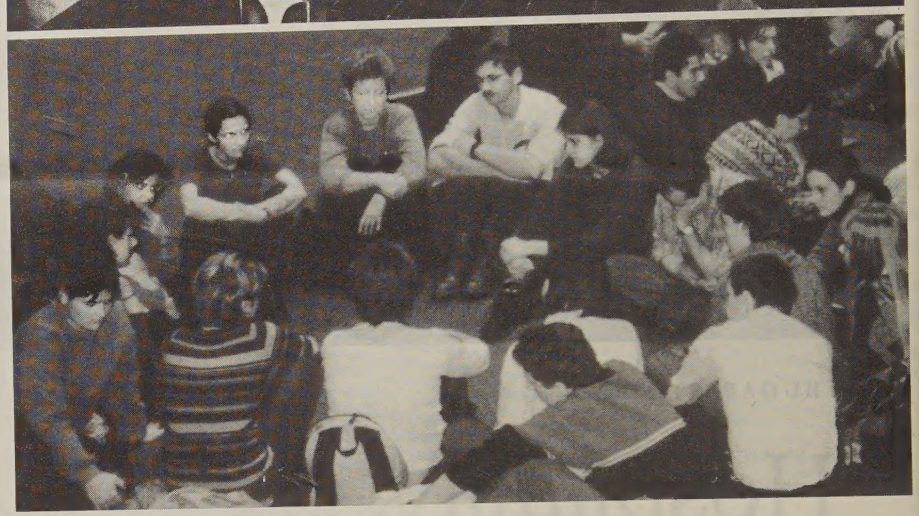
Doubts and Surprises

The often tense relations between Romania and Hungary awakened doubts about the welcome of the Romanians. Doubts on both sides of the border. This was one of the most joyful surprises

of this "pilgrimage of trust." For the Romanians: "We never imagined we would be welcomed this way in Hungary!" For the Hungarians: "We never realized we could become so attached to Romanians!" One of the host families had already had the experience in 1991 during the first meeting in Budapest. They had written on their registration form: "We can welcome four persons, but no Romanians please." On the day of the meeting, four Romanians showed up at their door. To understand what happened in the days together, all you had to do was look at their registration form this year: "Four persons, Romanians please!"

A young Hungarian architect wrote: "I had planned to welcome four persons in my flat. In the end I welcomed six, and four others for the meal on January 1st. The trust I showed them was given back to me a hundredfold. It is amazing to see how everything worked out in the end. Many others would say the same thing. I was not full of despair beforehand, but those days spent together certainly reinforced my hope, and perhaps the ability to look toward the future with confidence. And I know this is due to the goodness and the simplicity of those I met."

Many people's experience was similar and echo what the first Christians already knew: offering hospitality is, as for the disciples of Emmaus, discovering the face of God. The word "miracle" was on many people's lips. "We communicated without speaking the same language." A young man from Budapest said with a smile, "At Babel, God mixed up the languages because people were working against him. In Budapest, our common desire to live out the Gospel brought us together and made it possible for us to communicate."



"In the Beginning, Chaos..."

The oldest Catholic weekly newspaper in Hungary published this article by a member of a parish that welcomed 700 young people: "At first, everything was a bit chaotic. On December 28th, everyone arrived practically at the same time. It took time to welcome them and it was not easy. Our little church and parish house resembled a waiting room at a railway station in a war film! The welcome team worked well and our guests deserved an award for their patience and understanding. Thousands of persons in our capital discovered that offering their time and temporarily leaving the peace and quiet of their homes is not just an act of kindness, but also the experience that it is good to do this. In each parish, families opened their homes to strangers for a few days and discovered that we are rich. We are linked to one another more than we realize. On January 1st, our church was so full that the priests could hardly make their way to the altar. Those days carried an important message: the Christian faith is universal. Hungarian, Romanians, Italians, Japanese, Lithuanians, French: we are all members of the same family. We discovered that each of us has unique treasures, but also that these treasures can be shared. And that the act of sharing them does not compromise them but helps them to grow. In this way they are even more precious and belong to us more."

Kofi Annan's Message

This discovery corresponds well to the message that the United Nations' Secretary General, Mr Kofi Annan, addressed to the participants: "At a time when some are trying to divide the human family, it is comforting to know that so many of you—from different backgrounds, nationalities and cultures—are united in a common desire to meet and to share." (For the message of Pope John Paul II and other leaders, see www.taize.fr or the previous *Letter from Taizé*.)

Ukrainians United

The 3000 Ukrainians had this same experience during the meeting, and in an even more surprising manner during the trip home: "I was struck by how united the Ukrainians were in Budapest," wrote one of those in charge of a group. "The barriers that usually separate us fell down. We came from different churches and different regions, but we understood one another and we felt united. On the way home, in the Carpathian mountains, we saw this when a snowstorm made it impossible to continue. Groups from every region and every church came together to help one another. Aware of our serious problem of divisions, we are grateful for the gift we received in Budapest."

Prayer Together and Workshops

To help them to get around in Budapest, the participants received a map on which were marked the names of the parishes and the main meeting-places. Trams, train stations and the underground were filled to overflowing. The

visible joy of the young people made passers-by stop and wonder.

For the times of prayer that brought together this immense crowd at midday and in the evening, two halls of the Exposition Centre were set up. They were not large enough. Hall A was certainly the largest ever used for a Taizé European meeting. The decoration was tasteful and discreet. Orange fabric, some icons, a Christ inspired by the crown of Saint Stephen, so precious for the history of Hungary. Icons of John the Baptist and Mary, those two witnesses to God's Incarnation, expressed the hope that was at the heart of the Budapest meeting.

The first evening, few people sang, exhausted as they were by the journey. Things had already changed on December 29th when the prayer was shown live on national television. On the 30th and 31st practically everyone sang, even in Swedish and Polish. "There is so much beauty in this prayer," wrote Father Peter Varnai, youth chaplain for the diocese of Budapest, "that it is impossible to imagine a bleak future."

A brief meditation by Brother Roger was translated each evening into some twenty different languages. It completed the letter *Love and say it with your life*, used by the participants for the times of sharing in the morning. The Bible introductions that followed the midday prayers were also drawn from this letter: "Opening up roads of trust," "Dare to give your life," "The desire for God restores our soul to life."

The prayer around the icon of the cross that ended the evening prayer is always a moving moment. A number of Church leaders—Catholics, Reformed, Lutheran, Orthodox—prayed together with the brothers, then the young people kept coming up to the cross until the halls were closed for the night.

How Can We Transmit the Hope of the Gospel Today?

After the evening prayer, that question was asked in the press room to the Archbishop of Eger, president of the Hungarian bishops' conference. And the sincerity of his reply was striking: "Do you have an answer to that question? I don't. But my sole objective for the time that remains to me here on earth is to try and find an answer." Cardinal Paskai, the archbishop of Budapest, and other bishops came each evening to speak with the journalists present. A beautiful way of considering the young and the meeting was shown by Bishop Balas (see below) and by the Lutheran bishop Béla Harmati: "If the young have such a spiritual thirst, then there is a future for Europe."

On December 29th and 30th, workshops were offered. The final day was devoted to meetings by country on the topic: how can we continue at home after this meeting? Several workshops were held in the Exposition Centre, but others took place in places rich in symbolism and which expressed the warm welcome from Hungary and the attentiveness to the meeting on the part of national leaders (the President of the Republic took part in one of the prayers). The workshop on Europe took place in the Hungarian Parliament and was led by the head of the Supreme Court. And another workshop was held at the Supreme Court.

Creative Christianity

Near Hall A, young French people listened to someone read the list of themes that would enable each person to choose a group for the afternoon: Seeking God in prayer; The Holy Spirit : breath of life, witness to truth, comforter; Building the

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THE SOUL

What does the Bible mean by "the soul"?

The soul is human beings when they sing: "Praise the Lord, my soul... I want to sing to my God as long as I live"(Psalm 146). In biblical language, the soul is not part of a human being; my soul is **me**, my being, my life. The whole of Mary is present in her song when she says, "*Magnificat anima mia*, my soul magnifies the Lord" (Luke 1:46).

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for soul is *nephesh*. This word originally refers to a part of the body, the throat, perhaps also the stomach, and secondarily to the hunger and thirst that the throat and the stomach feel. The soul thus stands first of all for a bodily need, as can be seen for instance in the proverb: "A laborer's appetite (*nephesh*: his soul!) labors for him, for his mouth urges him on" (Prov 16:26) The soul is the appetite, the desire for life.

This desire for life brings humans and animals together in the great family of "living souls" (Gen 1:24 and 2:7). When this word is translated as "living beings," as it usually is, this is not wrong, but biblical language is more dynamic. As a "living soul," man is not a being who can be defined, but is in a certain sense a "living appetite for life." This desire for life goes so far that, in the final analysis, God alone can satisfy it. "Your name and your memory are the desire of our souls. My soul yearns for you in the night" (Isa 26:8-9).

People in the Bible love with their heart and soul (Deut 6:5). But while the heart thinks and plans (Gen 6:5; 1 Kings 3:9,12), the soul loves with passion (Song of Songs 3:1-4), is downcast (Psalm 42:6), and delights: "Here is my chosen one... in whom my soul delights" (Isa 42:1). This last text attributes a soul to God in order to express God's great joy in loving! The soul is a life that overflows conscious reason and will. Long before contemporary psychology, the Bible knew that human beings are not completely in control of their lives. They are not only reasonable; they can be touched, overcome and enticed in spite of themselves. Jesus shared this human condition. He was not unfeeling. He could say, "My soul is troubled" (John 12:27).

The soul is both an expression of human frailty and a priceless treasure. Jesus said, "What use would it be for someone to gain the whole world and ruin their own soul?" (Matt 16:26). The soul, in other words one's desire and joy in living, is the most precious thing of all. Ruining one's soul means merely existing instead of living. The loss of the soul, as Jesus says just beforehand, is expressed by a sadness that all the success, wealth or entertainment in the whole world can never take away. Saving one's soul means living a life beyond all our hopes. The salvation of the soul lies in joy and gratefulness.

Is the soul immortal?

The world in which the Bible came into being generally made a distinction between the corruptible body and the immortal soul. This vision of things has left its mark on the texts. But in order to avoid a confusion between God and the soul, no Bible text affirms explicitly that the soul is immortal. It is not a divine spark exiled in a material body. It is not the source of its own life any more than the body is; it receives life. God is "the only one who possesses immortality" (1 Tim 6:16).

Instead of looking for something immortal in human beings, believers in the Bible try to come to grips with the riddle of death. If God "created human beings for incorruptibility" (Wis 2:23), why does death exist? Job does not find comfort in thinking about the immortality of his soul, but laments the precariousness of his life: "My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle; they come to an end without hope" (Job 7:6).

God does not really give an answer to this riddle, but rather assures us of his love: "The mountains may leave their place and the hills be shaken, but my love shall never leave you" (Isa 54:10). The mountains are the most stable part of creation, and God's love is even more solid. "My life is only a breath" (Job 7:7), but the eternal God has become my God. In life as in death, I belong to God. Everything may vanish into oblivion, but communion with God is unending. "Yes my flesh dwells secure, for you will not abandon my soul to death" (Psalm 16:9-10). With these words, Peter announces the resurrection of Christ (Acts 2:31). He is not speaking just of the soul here. Paul will forge the paradoxical expression, a "spiritual body" (1 Cor 15:44) to express that the whole person is destined for life.

At the same time, Paul can sense that his bodily condition is an obstacle to intimacy with Christ: "Remaining in this body means living in exile far from the Lord" (2 Cor 5:6). "A corruptible body burdens the soul" (Wis 9:15), wrote a Jewish sage shortly before him. At times of war and persecution, the thought that the mortal body is not everything gives strength and courage: "I am enduring terrible pain in my body from this scourging, but suffering it with joy in my soul" (2 Macc 6:30). The body can be annihilated, but "the souls of the just are in God's hands" (Wis 3:1; see Rev 6:9). Jesus exhorts his disciples "not to fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul" (Matt 10:28).

In a Christian context, the concept of the immortality of the soul is a discreet and indirect approach to the great hope in the resurrection. Belief in the immortal soul is an expression of the truth that God will never forget a single human being. That Christ remembers me in his love is the life of my soul, an endless festival. "He has destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light" (2 Tim 1:10).

God of all human beings, when we have the simple desire to welcome your love, little by little a flame is kindled in the depths of our soul. That flame can be quite weak yet it keeps on burning, even if we are not aware of it.

Ep 5:8-14
1 Wed You are light in the Lord. Live as children of light; for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth.

Mk 12:28-34
2 Thu Jesus said: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength. Love your neighbour as yourself. These are the two greatest commandments.

Mk 10:46-52
3 Fri Jesus asked a blind man, "What do you want me to do for you?" "Rabbi, I want to see", he replied. And Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has saved you."

Col 3:1-5
4 Sat Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

Jn 14:18-21
5 SUN Jesus said to his disciples: In a short time the world will no longer see me, but you will see that I live and you will also live.

Is 2:2-5
6 Mon Isaiah said: The peoples of the earth will say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord so that he may teach us his ways."

Dn 2:19-23
7 Tue Daniel said: May God be blessed for ever and ever. The Lord reveals depths and mysteries, and light dwells with him.

1 Co 1:4-9
8 Wed You are eagerly waiting for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will continue to give you strength to the very end.

Jn 12:23-36
9 Thu ASCENSION
Jesus said: When I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all people to me.

Lk 12:22-32
10 Fri Jesus said to his disciples: Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the Kingdom.

Ep 6:18-20
11 Sat Pray in the Spirit at all times. Never tire of praying for all God's people.

Jn 17:1-11
12 SUN Jesus prayed: Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you and give eternal life to all those you have given him.

Mt 4:1-11
13 Mon Jesus said to the tempter: It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

Mk 9:30-37
14 Tue Jesus said: Whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.

Ps 10:14-18
15 Wed You hear the desire of the humble, Lord; you encourage them and listen to their cry.

Si 30:21-25
16 Thu Give your cares the slip, console your heart, chase sorrow far away, for sorrow is no use to anyone.

Mk 9:38-48
17 Fri Jesus said: If anyone gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ, then in truth I tell you, they will certainly not lose their reward.

Jn 6:57-63
18 Sat Jesus said: The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.

1 Co 12:3-13
19 SUN PENTECOST
There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but it is the same Spirit; there are different ways of serving, but it is the same Lord; there are many forms of activity, but in everybody it is the same God who is at work in them all.

Ac 4:32-34
20 Mon All the first Christians were one in heart and mind. No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but they shared everything they had.

1 Co 10:23-31
21 Tue Let no one seek their own interest, but rather the good of others. Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

Lm 3:54-57
22 Wed You came near when I called you, Lord, and you said, "Do not be afraid."

Lk 6:17-23
23 Thu Jesus said: Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

Is 54:10
24 Fri God says: Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, my faithful love for you will not be shaken.

Ep 2:19-22
25 Sat You are part of God's household. You are built upon the foundations of the apostles and prophets, and Christ Jesus himself is the cornerstone.

Jn 3:16-17
26 SUN God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Mt 7:12
27 Mon Jesus said: Do to others as you would like them to do to you.

1 Co 10:12-13
28 Tue God is faithful and will not allow you to be tempted beyond your strength. But when you are tempted, God will give you the means to stand up to it and will show you a way forward.

Mk 10:2-16
29 Wed Jesus said: In truth I tell you, anyone who does not welcome the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.

Jn 6:22-29
30 Thu Jesus said: Do not work for food that spoils, but for the food that endures for eternal life.

Jn 5:24-27
31 Fri Jesus said: Whoever listens to my words and believes in the one who sent me has passed from death to life.

These short readings are those read, day by day, at community prayer in Taizé. The Bible reference given indicates a slightly longer passage.

MEDITATING ON THE WORD

MAY

Holy Spirit,
you fill the universe,
and you place these
Gospel values
within reach of our
human weakness:
kind-heartedness,
forgiveness, and
compassion.

Is 46:3-5,9

1 Sat The Lord says to his people: I have carried you since you were conceived. Until your old age I shall be the same, I shall sustain and save you.

Jn 6:51-58

2 SUN Jesus said: Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me.

Mk 10:17-30

3 Mon Jesus said: Whoever leaves everything for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel will receive a hundred times as much in this present age, together with persecutions, and, in the age to come, eternal life.

Mt 6:19-21

4 Tue Jesus said: Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. For wherever your treasure is, there will your heart be too.

1 Th 5:12-22

5 Wed See that people do not pay back evil for evil, but always seek what is good, both among yourselves and for others.

Is 40:25-28

6 Thu The Lord says: Why do you complain, my people, saying, "My way is hidden from the Lord, my cause is disregarded by God"? Do you not know? The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the world, who does not tire or grow weary.

1 Co 3:18-23

7 Fri Paul writes: All things are yours; but you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God.

Ph 2:1-11

8 Sat Paul writes: Be one in love, one in heart and one in mind; do nothing out of jealousy or vanity.

Mt 9:10-13

9 SUN Jesus said: I desire mercy, not sacrifice. Indeed, I have come not to call the just, but sinners.

Ph 4:4-7

10 Mon Do not let anything worry you, but in every situation, by prayer with thanksgiving, let God know your desires.

Mk 10:42-45

11 Tue Jesus said to his disciples: You know that in the world rulers lord it over their subjects and make their power felt. This is not to happen among you. No, anyone who wants to be great among you must be your servant.

Col 1:15-20

12 Wed God wanted all his fullness to dwell in Christ, and through him to reconcile all things to himself.

Rm 13:11-14

13 Thu Paul writes: Let us put aside the deeds of darkness. Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Co 15:54-58

14 Fri Stand firm, let nothing shake you, be full of energy for the work of God, knowing that in the Lord nothing of your labour is wasted.

Mt 20:24-28

15 Sat Jesus said: The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life for the forgiveness of many.

Mt 9:35—10:8

16 SUN At the sight of the crowds Jesus was moved to compassion, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

Rm 12:14-21

17 Mon Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who are rejoicing, weep with those who weep.

1 Co 1:10-13

18 Tue May there be no divisions among you. Be closely united in mind and thought.

Lk 18:18-23

19 Wed Jesus told someone: You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me.

Mt 6:25-34

20 Thu Jesus said: Do not worry about your life. Seek first God's kingdom and saving justice and all other things will be given to you as well.

Ga 6:1-10

21 Fri Bear each other's burdens and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.

Lk 6:36-38

22 Sat Jesus said: Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate. Do not judge and you will not be judged.

Mt 10:26-33

23 SUN Jesus said: Not a single sparrow falls to the ground without your Father knowing. And even the very hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid.

Lk 3:10-18

24 Mon St JOHN THE BAPTIST John the Baptist said to the people: Anyone who has two tunics must share with whoever has none. And anyone with something to eat must do the same.

Ep 4:1-7

25 Tue With all humility, gentleness and patience, bear with one another in love. Take every care to maintain the unity of the Spirit by the bond of peace.

1 Co 12:4-11

26 Wed In each person the Holy Spirit manifests its action for the good of all.

Ps 18

27 Thu You are my lamp, Lord; you light up my darkness.

Ph 1:3-11

28 Fri Paul writes: I am confident that the One who began a good work in you will go on completing it until the day of Christ Jesus comes.

Mt 16:13-20

29 Sat SS PETER AND PAUL Jesus asked his disciples: "Who do people say I am?" "Some say John the Baptist," they answered, "some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." "But you," he said, "who do you say I am?" Peter spoke up and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Mt 10:38-39

30 SUN Jesus said: Anyone who gives their life for my sake will find it.

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JOHANNINE HOURS

May: Ezekiel 36:25-28

Sent into exile in Babylon, Ezekiel received the calling to communicate God's word in the face of the indifference and the apathy of his people who, having lost all their hope, were "hard of face and obstinate of heart" (2:4). Instead of requiring Israel to change in order to be worthy of him, God makes a commitment by taking the initiative. By his forgiveness God will purify his people and remove their "heart of stone." He will do so in such a way that nothing remains of the misfortunes and mistakes of the past, that nothing is opposed to God's presence among his people and in their heart, which has become a "heart of flesh."

God will put his "spirit" in them. God himself will dwell in believers' hearts. The Breath of life, the Spirit of God will renew them from within and will animate them as the principle of their life and behavior. In this way, each person will be able to follow the law, the expression of God's will, faithfully. In this intimate communion with God, human will and activity will be perfectly conformed to the divine will. That is the new covenant offered by God to his people and to each believer.

This new covenant is based on forgiveness. God's forgiveness is total, irrevocable. The past is wiped away. God does not want to remember our sins any longer (see Jer 31:34b), so we too do not have to be afflicted by them. In this way we can escape from the burden of the past. Liberated from remorse, from guilt feelings, from a focus on ourselves, from remaining at a standstill, we are enabled henceforth to create in communion. The forgiveness offered at every moment brings new life to us. However serious our wrongdoing was, a new beginning is always possible. The harshness that hurt others and myself can be transformed into a source of life.

When the disciples experienced this newness in a radical way at Pentecost, they understood that this promise was meant for all and that, by the overflowing gift of his Spirit, the risen Christ made a new communion possible.

- When have I been aware of the "heart of stone" in me? What does it mean to say that "God removes the heart of stone in us and replaces it with a heart of flesh"?
- How or when in my daily life can I let the Spirit who gives life act within me?

June: Ephesians 2:4-10

The author of the Letter to the Ephesians announces and celebrates the free gift of God's love. In spite of the fact that "we were dead in our transgressions... we are saved by God's grace" (Eph 2:5). For Saint Paul, grace is the foundation of the Christian life. Salvation is a gift from God. We do not earn salvation like a salary after doing our work well. We are saved because God is rich in mercy and tenderness, and because "all God can do is give his love" (Isaac of Nineveh, seventh century).

In the Old Testament, one of the prophets understood well that God loves his people unconditionally, the prophet Isaiah. In a passage read each year during the Easter vigil, Isaiah says to his people, "All you who are thirsty, come to the water! You who have no money, come, receive grain and eat; come, without paying and without cost, drink wine and milk" (Isa 55:1-11).

In the New Testament, this love has become a person: Jesus, the Christ. Jesus never spoke the word grace. But by his actions and his words, by his forgiveness and by giving his life freely, he showed us the depths of this love. And Jesus invites us to live in the same way as he did. The free gift of God's love does not turn us into people who are passive. This love "brings us back to life" with Christ (Eph 2:5) and makes us able to "dare to give our life for others" (Letter 2002). And a miracle can take place in our life: we begin to love as God loved us. Still more: God begins to love in us. "We are his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the good works that God has prepared in advance that we might undertake them" (Eph 2:10).

- When have I had an experience of unconditional love in my life? How did this experience affect or even change my life?
- What other Bible texts, words or actions of Jesus help me to understand the words of the Letter to the Ephesians, "we are saved by grace," by the free gift of God's love?

Johannine hours are meant as a way of seeking God in silence and prayer in the midst of our daily life. During the course of a day, take an hour or so to read the Bible passage with the short commentary and to reflect on the questions which follow. Afterwards, a group of 3 to 10 people can meet to share what they have discovered and perhaps for a time of prayer.

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European family: Europe seen from Budapest, Moscow; How to react in the face of suffering? Violence affects the young: how can we react? A universal communion in Christ : discover all the dimensions of the Church; Is forgiveness possible? God's call invites us to give ourselves; Living the simplicity of the Beatitudes; Making cities places to live for all; What can I do for an economy of solidarity? Budapest, a bridge between East and West: discovering a place of memory in Hungary; Concert of Orthodox liturgical chants by a youth choir from Novi Sad. There was also a space for silence and personal prayer.

What do all these themes have in common? Perhaps this: the call to put a creative Christianity into practice and the desire to prepare the young not to flee the challenges of our societies but rather to go towards them and to be present there. For example, those young people from Transylvania who, with a priest, have taken charge of 300 street children and who are living examples that "a few people with very little can do a lot."

The View of a Hungarian Bishop

One of the outstanding figures of the Hungarian Church, looked up to by the young, known for his candour that created problems for him during the Communist period (he was only named bishop after the fall of the Berlin Wall), Bishop Balas Béla, of Kaposvar, is the chairman of the Youth Commission of the Hungarian Bishops' Conference:

"We always have to encourage the young. A hundred came to the meeting from my diocese of Kaposvar. I prepared them personally not just for a powerful spiritual experience but also for possible difficulties. In such a crowd, many things can happen. I would like them to have the humor and the realism in their behavior towards people and towards society, which are never perfect. It was the Bolshevik error not to realize this; they didn't take original sin seriously. You have to know how to deal with difficulties and problems.

"We were born torn apart philosophically at the end of the Middle Ages, then torn apart religiously in the sixteenth century, then came political, military and ethnic divisions. The cause of this tearing apart was on the one hand a great diversity of intellectual viewpoints, but I think it was due mainly to a cooling down of the heart. That is what Taizé heals. The Taizé meetings are a remedy for the evils from which the world suffers.

"There are no intellectual debates there, but at Taizé the young people are in touch with the world of beauty, with music, silence, prayer and friendship, and that is what reconciles the world."

Senegal

In a Poor District of Dakar

"What are you doing there, in a poor district of Dakar?" Some Taizé brothers who have been in Senegal for the last nine years reply to this question:

Dakar is the westernmost point of Africa. We live in a large working-class neighbourhood. It is a great privilege to live among these people and to share with them. There are good things to be shared. And also many problems.

We are often asked, "What are you doing here?" In reply we use the greeting in Wolof, the language of Dakar. When you greet somebody you say, "What are you doing?" That surprised us a lot at the beginning. As if you could define a person by their activity. But the reply that is given reassured us. It is, "I'm here." Sometimes people even reply, "I'm here. That's all." And that settles many things. If I were not here, I would be doing nothing and you would not see me. So every time somebody asks us, "What are you doing in this neighbourhood?" we reply, "We're here."

It is not so simple "to be here," in this neighbourhood; to be really present, to pray here, to work here, to welcome others, and to be open to an entire population that at first you do not understand at all. And after nine years you only understand a very little, but we are here. Being here is not so simple, especially on a longer term. This is a big neighbourhood, full of life, with a lot of noise, smell, dust, mosquitoes, and many children, and that is the marvellous thing!

So we are here, and we are doing what we know how to do: prayer, work, welcoming, and sharing. And we wait to see what happens. And many things do happen and we have to react to them according to our means. Many things happen among the children, who are always the most welcoming. Very quickly, we wondered what we could do with them. We could see that they were missing out on many things. The school is really miserable, and the children have to learn things by heart and that is all. There are so many children and they are so lively that the teachers feel they have to beat them. Obviously they find something different at our place. They find things that awaken their interest; they learn how to observe things, to be creative. These are children who have never had a coloured pencil in their hands. One day we took them for a walk by the sea. One of them said, "But what's this blue?" Dakar is on a peninsula, with the Ocean all around. The child continued, "But there's such a lot of water here!" Living in Dakar, he had never seen the sea!

There is lot to be done among the youth as well—stimulating them, giving them encouragement in their studies, trying to communicate a little bit of hope to them. And it is often when they look after younger ones that they discover that they are worth something and that everything is not lost in them. And then there are the mothers and babies, etc.

Our activity is not limited to this neighbourhood. We have other concerns, with refugees, for instance, or with people with AIDS. There really is a great deal of work, and you have to make choices.

The great majority of people in Senegal are Muslim. It is not an obvious thing to live in a neighbourhood with a 90% Muslim majority. There is an initial period when you are being watched. "Who are these whites who have settled here? What are they up to? They look after our children. Could they be trying to convert them?" It takes time to win people's confidence, time for them to discover that we are here for something else. And now the great majority of the children and young people who come to our house are Muslim. Their parents accept this. What is really very beautiful is the kindness of the Muslims. Even the older ones, "the pillars of the mosque," as they are called, understood very quickly that we had not come to proselytize.

What does it mean to live among Muslims once you have been accepted? I think first of all it is for us to look at them in a way that recognizes the presence and the work of God in them. Look at them in a way that values their approach to faith and to prayer. We also want to present a certain image of the Church that is not arrogant and where perhaps something of the life of Christ can be perceived in those in whom he dwells. What we are living is not an interreligious dialogue. This is an apprenticeship of mutual trusting. It is a preparation for the day when there will be enough trust for further steps forward to be made. This takes place through good friendships with men who have made the pilgrimage to Mecca, who go to their prayer every evening at the same time we go to pray. This is an experience that is filled with hope.

All the children who often fill our house believe that we are helping them. That may be true. But they do not realize to what extent they are helping us. Africa today is full of problems, full of clouds, but when you live in the midst of these children who are so full of energy and will and spirit, it is impossible to be completely discouraged.

Every evening, the Christians—children, young people and some adults—join us for prayer. Often in the evening it is so hot inside that we pray in the courtyard. The children come to prepare the prayer: they spread out the mats, bring the prayer benches, the books, the icons, and the candles. And so we have a fine chapel under the starry sky, to the continuous buzzing of the mosquitoes. Some of the children are there every day. And if, for one reason or another, one of us misses a prayer, we are scolded the next day. "But where were you? And what about the prayer?" What gives us the biggest lift is their singing. The songs from Taizé have been translated into Wolof and they are transformed by the rhythm of the tom-toms. And then there is the silence. They are so attentive! Occasionally, one of the children sings solo and the gates of paradise open!

After nine years, what can we say? That our house is a kind of humming beehive, full of children who come to study, to reflect, to be stimulated; full of young people we try to help find a meaning to their life—and their inaction—in caring for the younger ones. There are even mothers who come to learn sewing. We take care of cuts and bruises. We even see tiny infants weighing two kilos arriving. Something can be done, but you can not do everything.

It is a great privilege to live in a neighbourhood like this; to be accepted by the people and not to be exploited. When you are accepted, it becomes possible to touch at close hand the problems that go all through Africa today, even though Senegal is not too badly off. Yet all the same, there are the insalubrious conditions that create health problems, not to mention the education problems....

Being in the midst of all this for us means sharing in part of the daily difficulties of life: constant power cuts or, when there is electricity, there is no water. Whenever it rains the streets are flooded. As for public transport, better not to mention it! Although life is often joyful here, how do we avoid letting ourselves be swept along by despair? Holding on to hope is almost like an act of will, propping people up so that they remain standing.... I think our salvation is the children. It is an extraordinary privilege to live amidst this swarm of children. They are so enthusiastic about each new initiative. They are the ones who enable us to go on hoping.

Letter from Taizé

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